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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6069
INFO RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 7544
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 5084
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 2333
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 1663
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000174

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA;
AMMAN FOR COHEN;
BEIRUT FOR ROSE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2019
TAGS: [OTRA](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: COUNTRY CLEARANCE GRANTED FOR NEA ACTING A/S
FELTMAN AND DELEGATION

REF: A. STATE 18866
[1](#)B. ABELL-BLAIR-CRAYNON E-MAIL

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Embassy Damascus welcomes and grants country clearance for the proposed visit of Acting Assistant Secretary of State (A A/S) for Near East Affairs (NEA) Jeffrey Feltman, NSC Senior Director Daniel Shapiro, and NEA Staff Assistant Oni Blair on March 7-8, 2009. Travelers will be met at the Jededehe (Lebanese) border terminal at 0830 on Saturday, March 7, by Charge d'Affaires (CDA) Maura Connelly, as well as Control Officer and an Embassy expediter.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Control officer and point of contact for this visit is Econ Officer Andy Abell, who can be reached at work: (963)-(11) 3391-3621; cell: (963)-933-480-855; or embassy fax number: (963)-(11) 3391-4687.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Funding: Post has received fiscal data for each traveler that will be used to cover lodging expenses. Additional Embassy costs that may be billed to the delegation fund cite include, but are not limited to, American and FSN overtime, visa and border crossing fees, transportation costs for official vehicles, long distance telephone calls, and other costs directly attributable to the visit.

[1](#)4. (C) Visa Requirement: Every visitor must have a valid visa to enter Syria. Post provided the Syrian government with travelers' passport information provided in reftel and requested expedited visa issuance at the Jededehe border terminal. While the Syrian government generally rigidly enforces restrictions on prior travel to Israel, Post has requested a waiver of this regulation in case all travelers do not have two diplomatic passports.

[1](#)5. (C) Security Requirements: Post received necessary security clearance information in reftel.

[1](#)6. (SBU) Transportation: Embassy transportation will be provided throughout your visit.

[1](#)7. (SBU) Lodging: A A/S Feltman will stay at the CDA's residence. Two "Club Level" rooms have been reserved for Ms. Blair and Mr. Shapiro at the Sheraton Damascus for the night of March 7. Confirmation numbers are: 385734 and 385735. The hotel phone number is: 963-(11)222-9300; fax number is 963-(11) 212-9349. The room rate is USD 180 plus 13 percent tax per night. This is within per diem and does include breakfast. The Sheraton accepts major credit cards.

¶8. (U) Communications Support: Long-distance telephone calls (for official business only) can be placed from the Embassy, although travelers should be aware that IVG service is frequently unavailable in Damascus. Internet-accessible computers are available in the Sheraton business center, and wireless internet is available in individual rooms for an additional daily fee.

¶9. (U) Currency Exchange: The Embassy Cashier will not be available as your visit occurs over a long holiday weekend. Most debit cards issued by American banks will work at ATM machines in Damascus operated by private banks, such as Bank Bemo Saudi Fransi (BBSF) or Audi Bank. However, American banks will not process ATM transactions at the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) due to U.S. Treasury Department sanctions against CBS. Travelers should minimize the amount of Syrian pounds exchanged because reverse accommodation exchange is generally not permitted on the local economy. Major hotels, such as the Sheraton, are authorized to perform reverse accommodation but will charge a commission.

¶10. (U) Photography: Photography of individuals in uniform (including police), government buildings, and military installations is strictly forbidden.

¶11. (U) Departure Tax: Syria charges a departure tax of 500 SYP (approximately USD 10), payable in SYP cash only. Travelers with diplomatic passports are exempt, but those with official passports must pay.

¶12. (U) Health: Health facilities in Damascus are not up to U.S. or European standards, and facilities outside Damascus are extremely limited. Only personnel covered under the

State Department's medical program and with a valid medical clearance for Syria are eligible for medevac at USG cost. It is recommended that all other travelers have medical evacuation insurance sufficient to cover evacuation by chartered air ambulance, or ensure that their agency will cover the cost.

¶13. (U) Threat Assessment: Political developments and security in the Middle East sometimes change quickly. The Embassy was attacked, without warning, in September 2006, by a small group of terrorists using automatic gunfire and grenades. They attempted, unsuccessfully, to detonate a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device at the rear gate. One local guard was seriously injured and there was at least one Syrian fatality in addition to the killing of the four attackers. Since the attack, the Embassy has taken additional measures to improve its security posture.

¶14. (U) Threat Assessment continued: In February 2005, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon was assassinated in Beirut, prompting the U.S. to recall its Ambassador to Syria for consultations. There are no plans to assign a replacement, reflecting the ongoing difficulties in U.S.-Syrian relations.

Government-sanctioned demonstrations have occasionally included expressions of anti-American or anti-Western sentiment. Violent mobs attacked three Scandinavian embassies in February 2006. In general, Americans in Syria should vary their schedules, avoid large crowds and gatherings, and report suspicious incidents to the Regional Security Officer.

Visitors should also read and follow the guidance in the latest public announcements and State Department travel advisories for Syria.

CONNELLY